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A MOONLIGHT RACE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

VICTORIAN AMERICA

Lithographs by Currier and Ives

ON THE EVENING of January 13th, 1840, the steamboat *Lexington*, bound from New York for Stonington, Connecticut, with a crew of forty and nearly one hundred passengers, caught fire on Long Island Sound. The wooden vessel burned like tinder, the lifeboats, badly handled, capsized on being launched, and the pilot's efforts to run the ship ashore failed when the engines stopped two miles from the coast. Occupants of the vessel had to choose between burning to death and drowning in the frigid water. Only a handful survived. Three days later, when New York was still humming with conflicting tales of the disaster there appeared what was perhaps the first illustrated extra in history. Headed "The Extra Sun", it bears a finely drawn and violently realistic picture of the flaming vessel. The print, which is followed by seven solid columns of letterpress describing the holocaust, is captioned "Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat 'Lexington' in Long Island Sound on Monday eveg. Jan. 13th 1840, by which melancholy occurrence over 100 persons perished". In small letters at the lower left-hand corner of the print are the words "Drawn by W. K. Hewitt", and at the right, "N. Currier, Lith. & Pub. 2 Spruce St. N.Y.". . . .

"The Extra Sun" was a sensation. It received columns of newspaper notices. Newsboys hawked it in the streets. The presses ran night and day to

supply the demand. Copies were shipped to other cities, and overnight N. Currier became a national institution. . . . It launched the firm on a half-century of prosperity as "Printmakers to the American People", during which time it depicted with fidelity and endless imagination every phase of life in a country that was growing from adolescence to maturity. . . .

In 1834, when Nathaniel Currier formed his first partnership, Andrew Jackson was President, the South was a slaveholding oligarchy, Texas still belonged to Mexico, the Great West was a wilderness, and the industrial revolution had yet to penetrate what was still an agricultural nation. In 1888, when Currier died, he left a country spanned from coast to coast by the railroads that had been only a curious experiment in 1834, a country which had fought a desperate war to preserve its unity and which had emerged from that war into a period of expansion and industrial growth unprecedented in history. His lifetime covered the conquest of the West, the harnessing of steam, the rise of industrialism, the Civil War and its aftermath of reconstruction and unification. They were years that saw an uncertain young republic establish itself as a great power, the formative years of a great nation, years crowded with events that cried for accurate and graphic presentation to a public that was becoming increasingly alive to the tempo of the times. Such a presentation the firms of N. Currier and later Currier and Ives were to provide generously in the form of inexpensive, finely executed lithographic prints that made their way into nearly every home and became in an amazingly short time an American institution. . . .

The Currier and Ives prints covered a wide variety of subject matter, from comics to reproductions of oil paintings by the finest artists of the day, from sentimental scenes to portraits of the great. There were prints of disasters and wrecks, of Mexican and Civil War land and naval battles, of clipper ships and whalers, of railroads and fire scenes. There were political cartoons and campaign banners; portraits of presidents, pugilists, and of such notables as General Tom Thumb; panoramic views of cities and scenes of farm and country life; scenes that depicted the winning of the West and life among the Indians; sporting prints, hunting and fishing pictures; a gallery of prints that helped immortalize the American trotter; and prints with a hundred other subjects as varied and as colorful as America itself. . . .

Today the same prints that were sold by the thousands for five to twenty-five cents apiece and never for more than three dollars apiece (this for the large folios) are collectors' items. They are eagerly sought out in print shops and at auctions and bring prices that range all the way from a few dollars for some of the smaller and commoner prints to the record three thousand dollars paid for a large folio print in 1928. The reasons for their disappearance and for their skyrocketing in value in so comparatively short a time are easy to understand. In the latter part of the last century came the development of chromolithography, photography, and photo-engraving; newspapers and illustrated weeklies began to take a prominent place in American life. With their rise the hand-colored lithographs of Currier and Ives began to go out of vogue. Because they had cost little they were not greatly cherished when newer and more fashionable pictures took their places on the walls. Thousands must have been destroyed and discarded as valueless. . . .

Now with the perspective that the passage of half a century or so has given us we can see their value and their merit. Some are crude, it is true, but more are the work of accomplished and talented artists. Some are merely quaint, some mawkishly sentimental and moralistic, and in some melodrama passes for drama. But more have distinction of line and composition, gracious coloring, and conscientious attention to accuracy of detail. All are homely in the best sense; simple, sincere representations of an era that is past. They belong to the genus Americanus and embody so genuine a record of our development and culture that the permanence of their place is assured. . . .

It has come as a surprise to many dealers and collectors to learn that all Currier and Ives prints were hand-colored. They were neither lithographed in color nor printed in color, but lithographed and printed in one-color ink and colored by hand afterwards. . . .

In the Currier and Ives shop the stock prints were colored by a staff of about twelve young women, all trained colorists and mostly of German descent. They worked at long tables from a model set up in the middle of the table, where it was visible to all. The models, many of which were colored by Louis Maurer and Fanny Palmer, were all first approved by one of the partners. Each colorist applied only one color, and, when she had finished, passed the print on to the next worker, and so on until it was fully colored. The print would then go to the woman in charge, known as the "finisher", who would touch it up where necessary. The colors used were imported from Austria and were the finest available, especially valued because they did not fade in the light. . . .

Many prints were also available uncolored. These were often used in schools where the pupils

colored them. Unfortunately many of them have also been colored in recent years and sold as originals. The trained eye, however, can readily detect modern coloring. . . .

Distribution was by no means limited to retail sale in the store (in New York). After the success of the *Lexington* disaster print, a number of pushcart salesmen would appear every morning at the store and each would select prints that he thought would suit the potential customers in his particular area. These were piled neatly on the carts, and in addition each peddler was supplied with a few prints to be attached to the sides of his cart to attract customers. Each peddler left a deposit on the prints taken. At night, the peddlers returned with the prints left, had their deposits refunded, and paid for the prints sold. . . .

The appointment of regular agents and sale to less regular peddlers in other cities was the next step. Distribution was astonishingly wide. Dealers and collectors have found prints in every section of the country, giving evidence of the fact that Currier and Ives agents must have been many and active. The firm also had a London office. It was probably from the agency that the great mass of prints that has been found abroad was distributed. In France the comics and the clipper-ship prints were especially popular, while Germany and Great Britain preferred the views and Western scenes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE ARTS COUNCIL is deeply indebted to the Library of Congress, U.S.A., for their permission to show in this country so unusual a collection of lithographs and for allowing one of the lithographs to be reproduced on the cover. The Currier and Ives prints are in themselves not only interesting technically and rich in unconscious humour, but provide a virtually complete record of the American scene between 1840 and 1890. The output of this printing firm was enormous, and their methods of distribution so enterprising that few American homes can have been without their lithographs on the walls. In Europe also the comics, the clipper ships and Western scenes enjoyed a considerable vogue.

The selection of sixty-one works in this exhibition has been taken from the larger exhibition in London arranged during the summer of 1955 in aid of the Greater London Fund for the Blind. Our sincere thanks are due to Mrs. Margretta Stroup Austin of the American Embassy for negotiating the loan with the Library of Congress, to Mr. C. H. Gibbs Smith of the Victoria & Albert Museum for helping in the selection, and to Mr. Harry T. Peters for permission to reprint as an introduction certain passages from his book *Currier and Ives: Printmakers to the American People*, published by Doubleday, Doran & Co. Inc. of New York.

CATALOGUE

VIEWS

1. Broadway, New York. 1875
2. The Falls of Niagara. 1873
3. The Great East River Suspension Bridge. 1877
4. The Levee, New Orleans. 1892

PIONEER WEST AND INDIANS

5. American Frontier Life. "The Hunter's Strategem". 1862
6. The Buffalo Hunt. Surrounding the Herd
7. A Check. "Keep Your Distance". 1853
8. The Last Shot. 1858
9. Murder of Miss Jane McCrea. 1846
10. The Prairie Hunter. "One Rubbed Out". 1852
11. The Surprise. 1858

AMERICAN LIFE

12. Fashionable "Turn-Outs" in Central Park. 1869
13. "Four in Hand". 1887
14. The Road. Winter 1853
15. Sickness and Health
16. Summer in the Country
17. Winter in the Country. A Cold Morning. 1863

SHIPS

18. American Steamboats on the Hudson. 1874
19. The Grand New Steamboat Pilgrim. 1883
20. The Grand Saloon of the Palace Steamer Drew. 1878
21. The Iron Steamship "Great Eastern". 1858

RAILROADS

22. American Railroad Scene. Snowbound. 1872
23. Across the Continent. "Westward the Course of Empire . . ." 1868
24. The Danger Signal. 1884
25. Night Scene at an American Railway Junction. 1876
26. Prairie Fires of the Great West. 1872

MISSISSIPPI RIVER SCENES

27. The Champions of the Mississippi. 1866
28. A Midnight Race on the Mississippi. 1890
29. "Rounding a Bend" on the Mississippi. 1866
30. "Wooding Up" on the Mississippi. 1863

FIREFIGHTING

31. The American Fireman. Facing the Enemy. 1858
32. The Life of a Fireman. The Metropolitan System. 1866
33. The Life of a Fireman. The New Era. Steam and Muscle. 1861
34. The Life of a Fireman. The Night Alarm, 1854

EVENTS (TRAGEDIES, ETC.)

35. Awful Conflagration of the Steamboat Lexington
36. The Grand Display of Fireworks and Illuminations at the Opening of the Great Suspension Bridge between New York and Brooklyn. 1883

HISTORY

37. Destruction of the Rebel Monster "Merrimac", May 11th, 1862
38. Destruction of the Rebel Ram "Arkansas", August 4th, 1862
39. The Fall of Richmond, Virginia, April 2nd, 1865

SPORTS

40. American Dead Game. 1866
41. American Hunting Scenes. A Good Chance. 1863
42. A Disputed Heat. Claiming a Foul. 1878
43. The Great International University Boat Race. August 27th, 1869
44. Home from the Woods. 1867
45. The New York Yacht Club Regatta. 1869
46. Peytona and Fashion.
47. Ready for the Trot. 1877
48. Rysdyk's Hambletonian. 1876
49. Trotting Cracks on the Snow
50. Volunteer Crossing the Finish Line. 1887

MORALISTIC PRINTS

51. The Bible and Temperance (Part i)
52. The Bible and Temperance (Part ii)
53. The Bible and Temperance (Part iii)
54. The Bible and Temperance (Part iv)

COSTUME AND MISCELLANEOUS

55. The Bloomer Costume. 1851
56. The Death of Minnehaha. 1867
57. Death of Washington. 1846
58. General Tom Thumb. 1849
59. Little White Kittens. Into Mischief. 1871
60. Star of the North. 1847
61. Star of the South. 1847

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